

Natural gas use heats to a record level in January

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By the end of the month, Questar Gas customers throughout the state will have burned a record amount of natural gas keeping January's winter chill out of their homes.

The company says it delivered the highest daily volume in its 77-year history on Jan. 15, when it piped 911,000 decatherms of natural gas to its customers' homes - a figure that far eclipsed the previous 24-hour volume of 818,000 decatherms set in December 2005.

A decatherm represents roughly the heat content in 1,000 cubic feet of natural gas.

"To give an idea of how much natural gas our customers have been using, we've delivered about 10 percent of the normal annual usage over the past two weeks alone," Questar spokesman Chad Jones said.

Yet that record monthly consumption - driven by the recent cold snap throughout the state - won't necessarily mean that consumers' gas bills will be significantly higher than in January last year.

Alan Allred, chief executive officer for Questar Gas, pointed out that the company's rates are about 22 percent lower than a year ago, while temperatures have been about 19 percent colder than normal.

Wholesale prices for natural gas produced in the Rocky Mountain states, which Questar supplies to its customers without any markup are approximately 19 percent lower than last January, according to data supplied by Bloomberg News.

"Lower wholesale gas prices could mean a natural gas bill that's about the same as last year," Allred said in a statement.

From Jan. 13 through Jan. 19, Questar's average daily deliveries have been approximately 867,000 decatherms. Since then, with the weather warming slightly, Questar has been supplying an average of about 728,000 decatherms a day.

Other companies are seeing a similar demand for heating fuel.

"We've been extremely busy this month trying to keep up with demand," said Mark Harris, general manager of Salt Lake City-based Kiva Energy, which supplies propane used in rural areas of the state.

"The whole propane supply system in the region is being pushed real hard right now."